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**A qualitative look at middle SES preschoolers:  
media consumption and social behaviors**

by

**Jaime S. Bell**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Young children are being exposed to more television than what is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics and previous research has shown that aggression and violence can be correlated with cartoon exposure. However, little research has explored the influence on cartoon viewing on preschoolers in their typical home environments. Using social learning theory as a guide, this research used in depth interviews with parents and caregivers of preschoolers for insight into what types and amount of content preschoolers are consuming and what behaviors observers are witnessing after exposure. Contrary to expectations, participants of this study seemed to perceive more positive aspects of learned behaviors from cartoon exposure than negative. However, all participants displayed some form of negative behavior in certain situations, although sources from which these behaviors are learned could not be specifically identified.

**KEYWORDS:** preschoolers, aggression, cartoon content, social learning

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The environment in the twenty-first century is media rich. People of all ages are surrounded by media from morning until night. We hear it greet us on our alarm clocks or on the radio in our vehicles, see it on billboards outside or in magazines while waiting for the doctor, and view it using computers, playing gaming devices or when watching television.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents and caregivers limit preschool-aged children to no more than 1 to 2 hours of quality educational television content per day, and that children under the age of two not be exposed to any type of television or screen time at all (Anderson & Pempek, 2005; AAP, 1995; Anderson et al., 2003). These limits are prescribed to allow for children's developing minds to use imagination, explore the world and increase physical activity and interaction with family or friends (Funk, Brouwer, Curtiss & McBroom, 2009). However, parents and other adults seem to be taking this recommendation lightly. One of the largest national studies of preschool-aged media effects, the *Kaiser Family Report* (2003), showed that the use of television among the youngest children keeps rising (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). The report finds that preschoolers are exposed to much more screen time than recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. "The vast majority of children are growing up in homes where the television is at a near-constant presence (p. 4)." "77% of children age six and under watch TV every day, (p. 6, chart 8)" and more than half of parents reported they've "seen their 4-6 year-olds imitate behaviors from TV (p. 8, chart 15)." Television is obviously a convenient way to entertain children when a parent handles things like phone calls or dinner, and many parents say they are likely to utilize TV in this manner (Hamlett, 2008; Rideout et al., 2003).

Children today are growing up with several media options in their homes (Tidar &

Lemish, 2003; Rideout et al., 2003). Television, video games, computers and DVD players are all considered “screen time” and each of these can be broken down even further: iPads, Leap Pads, and other computers or gaming devices, for example. According to an *American Journal of Pediatrics* study, preschool-aged children are consuming approximately 4.1 hours of various screen media every day (Saint Louis, 2013; Tandon, Zhou, Lozano & Christakis, 2011).

For the purpose of this research, “preschool-aged children” and “preschoolers” throughout will refer to children ages three and four, regardless of whether or not they are currently enrolled in preschool.

### **Problem Statement**

Scrutinizing the influence of television and media on youth is not new however, the influence on preschoolers is generally understudied. Even though a meta-analysis showed that preschoolers seem to be the highest influenced age group (Paik & Comstock, 1994), focus on these younger children, just shy of entering the “school-aged” category is not very common. Christakis & Zimmerman (2007) confirm “considerably less attention has been given to the effects of television on preschool children” (p. 994).

Preschoolers are developing at a rapid growth stage, transforming into ‘youth’ from ‘babies.’ They are at a critical point in development and seem to be learning things at an earlier age than children even a decade ago; due to the society’s rapidly advancing environment (To, Cadarette & Liu 2001). Focus on this age group is important because of their influential state of mind (Cherry, 2013). They are becoming more independent and absorbing everything around them; commonly referred to as ‘sponges.’ Preschoolers are learning more about emotions and feelings, how to use them and what is healthy or not (Whitaker, 2008). They are forming their own ideas of what relationships are, how they work and what is considered ‘normal’ in general

(Gleason, 2002; Whitaker, 2008).

Effects knowledge is not developing at the same speed as the media toward influential preschoolers (Hamlett, 2008; Rideout et al., 2003; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). It should be imperative to discover the influence of this exposure on preschoolers specifically (Livingstone, 2006). Rideout et al. (2003) point out how crucial it is to understand media use and its impact on younger children: “The impact that this level of media exposure has on children’s development is unknown, but one thing is certain: it is an issue that demands immediate attention from parents, educators, researchers and health professionals (p. 12).”

Young children love to watch cartoons and animated films (Hamlett, 2008; Huston, Wright, Marquis & Green, 1999) and violence is actually quite prevalent in cartoons (Basore, 2008; Christakis & Zimmerman, 2007, Kirsch, 2006; Peters & Blumberg, 2002). Even classic cartoons are famous for what is called ‘slapstick comedy’ (Klinger, 2006), in which the violence is disguised because it is intended to be funny (Kirsh, 2006). Young children can misinterpret this in different ways and even take the view that ‘it’s funny when someone gets hurt’ literally (Kirsh, 2006). In Tom & Jerry cartoons, the audience can witness multiple violent scenes from dynamite explosions to Tom blowing Jerry’s head off with a gun (Tom & Jerry Spotlight Collection, Vol. 1-3), to slightly simpler forms of violence such as Jerry whacking Tom’s face with a golf club (Barbera, H., 1945) or Jerry smashing Tom’s feet in the theater seat leaving them throbbing (Jones, C., 1966). Other well-known cartoons of the same era like Road Runner cartoons demonstrate a constant chase with Wile E. Coyote trying to kill the Road Runner. In “Beep Prepared,” the coyote tries to shoot Road Runner with a bow and arrow -- just one of his several attempted methods to inflict harm or kill (Jones, C., 1961).

Can watching violent and aggressive acts in cartoons create a lack of empathy in young

developing preschoolers? Clearly this is not a new question to ask. The Mayo Clinic (2013) discusses desensitization in children as one of several possible links to exposure (p. 2). In 1969, attempts to ban certain violent cartoon programs were made by the National Association for Better Broadcasting, ultimately leading to a research investigation by the U.S. Surgeon General of the effects these programs have on young children (Klinger, 2006). Studies from the early 1980s through the late 1990s found high levels of violence in the animated content children were watching (Clark, 2009; Klinger, 2006). Of current popular cartoons, *Bugs Bunny*, *Sponge Bob* and *Scooby Doo* were identified as having violent content by researcher Michelle Garrison (Garrison & Christakis, 2011; Huffington Post, 2013). One would anticipate regular programming geared toward adults to have much higher acts of violence or aggression, but results of a study conducted by psychologists quantitatively indicates that audiences witness greater amounts of physical types of aggression in children's programs than in regular television shows (Clark, 2009; Linder & Gentile, 2009). In addition to physically violent content, studies in the past decade have also included non-physical aggressive content to the mix (Hamlett 2008; Ostrov, Gentile & Mullins, 2013). Basore (2008) reviewed the past thirty years of research about behavior outcomes after media exposure and concluded "a result of increased aggressive behavior, especially in children (p. 1)." However, Ostrov et al. (2013) identified "significant gaps in the literature (p. 39)" regarding the most impressionable preschool-aged children and particular aggressive acts.

### **Rationale for Conducting the Study**

Perhaps one reason for a lack of knowledge about aggressive behavioral effects from cartoon exposure is because of contradictory results in various studies over the years; therefore leaving some uncertainty (Livingstone, 1996). Surveys can point out correlations between the



exposure and aggression but not determine direction (Rawlings, 2011) and while experiments can measure causality, they are often limited by focusing on short term effects or collecting data in environments that lack external validity. Another potential avenue to explore this relationship is through in-depth interviews, capturing what parents are witnessing their children demonstrate in their day-to-day social lives.

Parents and those that work directly with preschoolers on a regular basis know them best. A variety of research methods have been used, from surveys to observations in a laboratory or classroom setting by people trained on the topic (Bandura, 1977; Leff & Crick, 2010; Livingstone, 1996). Whitaker (2008) adds that “it is helpful to collect observed behavioral data on the children from more than one setting (p. 6).”

The results of such a study might help bridge some gaps in knowledge in a more meaningful way than experiments or trained observations can. For example, Ostrov et al., (2013) pointed out one specific place in which this study could contribute. “Future experimental studies are needed to test the hypothesis that children are modeling behaviors from peer conflict scenarios seen in educational programs (p. 42).” Observations of 3 and 4-year-olds in their natural settings can provide detailed insight and illustrations of behaviors that quantitative data cannot, especially in more intimate situations such as conflict scenarios. Qualitative research has not yet been done on cartoons and behavioral outcomes in preschoolers as perceived by their parents and caregivers. Are parents witnessing modeled behaviors children see in cartoons? In response to this gap in the literature, this study will collect the personal interpretations of parents and caregivers of preschooler children to analyze how exposure to cartoons may be linked to any type of aggression or violence in everyday child play or conflict.

In-depth interviews of adult parents and caregivers of preschool-aged children will help

determine whether those who watch cartoons display any type of aggressive or violent behavior in their daily lives. The interviews for this study pose questions about the types of programs children watch and what types of physical or relational aggressive behaviors they display toward family, friends, or animals. This study also attempts to find out what characteristics in both the children and the cartoons are involved; by asking for specific observations of the children's pretend play scenarios and even activities done in solitude.

An obvious potential effect could be physical aggression or violence, in which physical harm is caused to another person or animal. There are also non-physical forms of aggression like relational aggression to consider. Relational aggression can be verbal or emotional. It is a less obvious method for children to manipulate another without physically causing harm (Young, Hottle, Warburton & Young, 2010). Hamlett (2008) found that this type of aggression “seeks to disrupt or harm friendships to cause mental harm or stress for another” (p. 16) and happens “more frequently in close relationship rather than casual peer relationships” (p. 17). Given this information, parents and close caregivers of the preschoolers might be essential witnesses to these children's closest relationships; to their siblings or best friends. Are today's preschool-aged children learning skills that negatively affect their relationships with others from animated television or films?

In summary, violent and aggressive acts have been identified in cartoon content and concern about the quantity of screen-time children receive have been expressed (Funk et al., 2009; Hamlett, 2008; Peters & Blumberg, 2002; Rideout et al., 2003). In *Mass Media and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Sonia Livingstone (1996) notes that we need to “ask different, more interesting, more productive questions” (p. 317) to help iron out the differences in interpretations of findings between social science, policy makers and society itself.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the behaviors of preschool-aged children through the observations of their parents, caregivers and teachers and determine what perceptions these insiders have on the topic. This study wants to know if children's behaviors demonstrate interpretations of what they view in cartoons. Social science and media research has plenty of quantitative data available to support ideas or concerns about violence and aggression in cartoons, but very little about how parents and caregivers of preschoolers currently perceive these topics or what they are witnessing regarding the behavior of their children. Understanding how young people, especially preschoolers, digest what they see on television is very important (Anderson et al., 2003; Huston, Wright & Green, 1999; Livingstone, 1996).

### **Potential Benefits**

Highlighting different forms of aggression in preschoolers' daily behaviors may increase awareness of overlooked content in cartoons and programs geared toward this age group. If warranted from the findings, such awareness could eventually support policy regarding program content and rating systems for preschool-aged children and possibly more actively involved parents on the issue (Saint Louis, 2013). Due to the fear of violence justifiably on the rise in society; the media industry, educators, caregivers and parents could all benefit from understanding early childhood influences on aggressive and violent behavior, especially if any contributing sources can be more controlled (Basore, 2008). Ostrov et al. (2013) suggests the need for "simpler and more explicit lessons for younger children's programming" and implies that producers could re-evaluate their rating system to cover all types of aggression when rating programs and content (p. 38). In turn, this would help make parents more aware of what their children are watching. Educators and pediatricians need to help raise awareness as well.

On a more practical level, everyone is an audience of mass media. Not only are there

various attitudes or rules enforced (or lacking) within every child's individual home, but there are certain perspectives and approaches taken by everyone the child interacts with during this developmental stage. Childcare providers, teachers and grandparents can also loosen or tighten the 'reigns' of screen-time, or become more involved in assisting with comprehension, therefore culturally shaping who that child grows up to be in society. Results from this study can help educate and inspire people to become more proactive about media involvement and mediation in preschoolers' lives.

I chose this topic for research because I too, am a mother with young children. At the time I began my research, my son had just turned four. I had already known about the recommendations for limiting exposure, but my son was already exposed to more than the recommended amounts of television, including cartoons. After noticeable and negative changes in his behavior, we limited exposure and some types of cartoon content dramatically, and saw improvement. This research is important to me because I fear not enough emphasis has been placed on preschool-aged children and media and I assume many other parents share similar concerns.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Literature about previous studies for this review were gathered using primarily online libraries through Iowa State University, EBSCO database and Wiley Online library. Printed books on media, communications and behaviors were also reviewed. Words used to search for data on the topic included: *preschoolers, young children, development, aggression, cartoon content, violence, social learning theory, social cognitive theory and observational learning*. Additional material was obtained by utilizing citations from the retrieved articles and books.

This review of literature provides evidence of aggressive or violent content found in cartoons, correlations with aggressive behavior in preschoolers, their highly influential development stage and gaps in knowledge to date. It also includes strategies and theories around media exposure, preschool-level comprehension and the theoretical framework for this study. Finally, research questions this study hopes to answer will be presented.

### **Social Learning Theory**

According to Wimmer & Dominick (2013), theory is defined as “a set of related propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relationships among concepts (p. 12).” This study is based on a set of hypotheses by Albert Bandura (1977), known as the Social Learning Theory (SLT). SLT has often been used to explain youth behaviors. The SLT framework can help explain how aggressive or violent behavior and screen time may be related.

Bandura (1977) states: "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions

this coded information serves as a guide for action (p. 22).” SLT explains how people, specifically children, mimic behaviors after watching someone else model it (Bandura, 1977). Children can observe all kinds of things, including aggression, by observing adults, other children, or characters they like in media (Anderson et al., 2003; Whitaker, 2008).

Albert Bandura and his colleagues (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; Bandura, Ross & Ross 1963) launched a set of experimental series in the 1960s to attempt to demonstrate how aggression can be learned through observation. These experiments are sometimes referred to as the “Bobo Doll” experiments. Children the ages of 4 and 5-years old randomly watched one of three films: a film of boys picking fights and attacking toys with a reward at the end for winning, one with the attacker getting beat by the opponent and punished, and the last showing two children playing without any aggression involved. The result was twice as much aggression in the children who saw the behavior rewarded as in the rest of the groups. The kids were interviewed afterward and said they weren’t sure the behavior they watched was normal or acceptable, yet were intrigued to copy it because they saw the films’ actors get away with it and in fact, get rewarded (Bandura, 1977; Livingstone, 1996).

Bandura (1977) said four main components need to happen before someone will engage in modeled behavior: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. The individual must first pay attention to specific features of the modeled behavior. Retention is when the information they observed manifests into concepts in their memory. Reproduction happens when the child is physically able to do what they saw and learned. Lastly, the child has to have some sort of motivation to try the learned behavior at a later time (Bandura, 1977; Whitaker, 2008). Since people obviously don’t imitate everything they learn, motivation factors become important predictors of when modeled behavior will be adopted. Bandura notes three types of motivations:

direct, indirect or self-produced. Direct are real life experiences of either reward or punishment following certain actions. The child subconsciously learns patterns of behavior based on what results from his or her actions (Bandura, 1971). Indirect, also termed vicarious, motivation are when the child sees a particular act rewarded when someone else engages in the behavior, which creates an outcome expectation. If this expectation is positive, there is an indirect motivation to engage in the behavior to also achieve the positive outcome. In the short films, the winning attacker of the Bobo doll got a reward, representing an indirect motivation. What was even more effective is that it was reinforced for someone they perceived as similar to themselves; in this case, another child (Bandura, 1986; Whitaker, 2008). Self-produced motivation is one's personal evaluations of their own behavior. Some people are harder on themselves than others, but personal judgment of behavior plays a role as well (Bandura, 1971). Depending on the child's personal formed attitudes and beliefs, this could either trump or hinder other influences on a conscious or subconscious decision.

Bandura (1977) saw aggression as a result of modeling after an observed behavior was reinforced in some way. For the children in Bandura's study who watched aggressive behavior, the likelihood of imitation increased most when no negative consequences were shown. Livingstone (1996) mentions a study by Turner, Hesse and Peterson-Lewis (1986) that argue "there are significant parallels between the situation in Bandura's experiments and that of the domestic viewing situation: children may and often do identify with characters who are rewarded for their aggression in television programmes," and, "being arbitrarily provoked before viewing also enhances the effect (p. 4)." For the audience under study, namely preschoolers, a frequently viewed genre of television is cartoons.

## **Aggression and Violence in Cartoons**

When people think of violence, behaviors such as hitting, pushing or other physical acts often come to mind. Wilson & Drogos (2007) also identify “gossiping, spreading rumors, being rude and engaging in mean talk,” (p.22) as forms of relational or social aggression. Girls have been found more likely to use relational aggression and boys more likely to exhibit physical aggression (Hapkiewicz & Roden, 1971; Bandura, 1977; Friedrich & Stein, 1975; Christakis & Zimmerman, 2007; Hamlett, 2008). Hamlett (2008) points out that because physical aggression is the most obvious type of violence, adults might discuss consequences about it and disregard acts of relational aggression without realizing it (p. 21).

While cartoons are often considered an innocent type of content, research finds them to contain significant amounts of both types of violence. Christakis and Zimmerman (2007) found that programming designed for children contained higher levels of violence and aggression than adult programming. “Every single G-rated film in theaters in the United States up to the year 1999 contained violence and half of them showed at least one character rejoicing in violence by cheering and laughing (p. 994).” Similarly, Kirsh (2006) conducted an overview of previous research about youth perceptions of cartoon violence as well as its effects. He found that “Violence in cartoons is an integral part of cartoon content. In fact, frequency of violence in cartoons is higher than in live-action dramas or comedies...youth are more likely to view media-depicted violence during Saturday morning cartoons than during prime time television hours (p. 548).” Kirsh (2006) gives specific examples of both violent cartoons using comedy like *Woody Woodpecker* or *Scooby Doo*, and violent cartoons with no intended humor like *Samurai Jack* and *Batman: The Animated Series*. He notes that “comedic elements may camouflage and trivialize depictions of violence” and this influences perceptions of violent content to be less serious (p.



548).

According to Peters and Blumberg (2002), some of the highest amounts of aggression and violence on television have been reported in cartoons. “92% of Saturday morning cartoons from 1973 to 1993 contained some form of violence” (p. 144). The article also referenced findings from The National Television Violence Study (1997): “Nearly two-thirds of serials for children contained violent acts,” including but not limited to “Japanese cartoon “anime” like *Batman Beyond* and *Cardcaptors*.” (p. 144).

Watching cartoons allows preschoolers to witness numerous examples of interpersonal relationships, even if it’s make-believe. According to Klinger (2006), content analyses of animated programs were scarce between approximately 1996 - 2006, but a 1995 study found several Saturday morning cartoons, such as *Spiderman* and *GI Joe* that ranged from “tame” to “sinister” violence (p. 37). Klinger referenced one of her earlier studies (Klinger, Brestan, Park, & Star, 2002) which suggested that child characters showed more inappropriate behaviors in child-audience cartoons than child characters in adult-audience cartoons like *King of the Hill* or *The Simpsons* (Klinger, 2006, p. 39).

Likewise, the levels of violence in cartoons are not a new phenomenon. A content analysis of cartoons produced from 1930–1995 identified simple assault as the single most common type of violence shown in cartoons. When nonviolent, aggressive content was coupled with simple assault, the study concluded the aggressive content of animated cartoons had not changed significantly over time. Victims of assaults in cartoons did not show many adverse effects from the violent behavior, implying that the assault was not very serious. This, in turn, suggested that assault (physical violence) and aggression were common ways to respond to negative feelings toward others (Klein & Shiffman,, 2008).

A more recent quantitative study in 2008 analyzed aggressive content in children's programming by identifying and coding images and themes. The content included three major television networks: PBS, Nickelodeon, and The Disney Channel (Hamlett, 2008). The study compared differences between what they term informal shows and educational shows that were "rated appropriate for preschool age children (p. 33)" and explored if aggression was displayed, how it was depicted by the characters and how often it happened (p.47). The main categories of aggression reviewed were physical, verbal and relational types. Content with physical aggression consisted of character(s) in the cartoon that used physical means to inflict harm on another. Verbal aggression included characters calling another a name or teasing them. Relational aggression was identified if "means used to manipulate someone else in a way that would change a relationship or friendship" (Hamlett, 2008, p. 41). Results found greater amounts of physically, verbally and relationally aggressive actions in the informal programs than in the educational programs (Hamlett, 2008, p. 48) with a greater amount of educational programs showing no aggressive actions at all. Of the three networks reviewed, 91% of Disney's programs were informal, followed by 28% of informal programs on Nickelodeon, and zero informal programs on PBS (Hamlett, 2008, p.35).

Following SLT in regards to behavior reinforcement, Hamlett (2008) reviewed consequences shown in the children's cartoons and programs. The consequences for each type of aggressive behavior were grouped into positive or negative, direct or indirect, or no consequences shown. Hamlett (2008) provided an example of a direct positive consequence: "laughs from the audience, or the victim giving into the aggressor (p. 42)," and a direct negative was a punishment shown for the behavior. Rewards or a moral of the story later in the program, not immediately after the behavior, were identified as indirect consequences (p. 42). Findings

revealed that “informal programs contained a significantly greater number of aggressive actions for physical, verbal and relational aggression when compared to educational programs (p. 65),” and “aggressive behaviors depicted in informal programs were more likely to be reinforced by positive consequences to those found in educational programs (p. 67).” The study concluded by pointing out a trend in consequence portrayal in the kids’ programming: aggressive acts often go unpunished or are even rewarded, which “indirectly supports anti-social behavior” (p. 71).

Similarly, Basore (2008) studied violence in children’s programming and the circumstances around it. In general, preschoolers are seeing bad guys successfully making personal gain by doing bad things. The main message received is then “if I want something, I can behave violently to get it and avoid punishment (p. 52).” In the superhero-type scenarios, the violence is “glamorized and clean,” possibly suggesting that if the character committing the violence doesn’t really hurt their victims, it must be an acceptable type of scenario (p. 52).”

Good vs. evil themes with both superheroes and villains have been attractive in cartoons for years (Peters & Blumberg, 2002). Violence and aggression in cartoons become justified when used to defeat the evil characters, which reinforces it as acceptable to the child audience. The study concluded that “it is essential to determine what children interpret and learn from what they watch” in order to know exactly what effects cartoon violence has on preschool children (p. 146).

### **Preschool Development and Interaction with Media**

Preschoolers ages 3 and 4-years old are at a crucial development stage mentally and emotionally, making the content of what they watch very important. How people form and categorize things about life in their own mind is called a schema. “Schemas are cognitive structures that organize responses to experiences” (Kirsh, 2006, p.549). Kirsh (2006) found that

preschool-aged children can't apply expectation schemas as easily as older children and "tend to base morality on observed consequences than the intent of the harm doer," therefore possibly likely to underestimate violence (p. 550).

Within the realm of media, younger children under the age of five may not be able to distinguish the difference between reality and fantasy (Klinger, 2006; Hamlett, 2008; Richert & Smith, 2011). Likewise, young children can remember events within a program but often don't associate them with moral of the story. Even the single year difference between a 3- and 4-year-old can be significant because cognitive skills keep improving each year (Kirsh, 2006; Peters & Blumberg, 2002; Tidhar & Lemish, 2003; Ostrov et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2013). Calvert (2008) finds preschoolers to be "especially vulnerable" to the imitation of media content due to their lack of cognitive skills to interpret different intent of television content (p. 208) and Klinger (2006) writes "Preschoolers and young children may readily imitate televised behaviors because they lack the ability to associate behavioral acts with motives and consequences" (p. 3).

Although preschoolers remain an understudied audience regarding the influence of violent content (Christakis & Zimmerman, 2007), initial research suggests that preschoolers may be influenced negatively by violent content in the media. Wilson & Drogos (2007) remind us that preschoolers often take things literally and don't understand sarcasm or context. They also seem to form some emotional connection to certain characters, and pretend to be those characters. Preschoolers' connections with cartoon characters could be indirect motivation for repeating the learned behavior. When a connection is established, the impact of media on aggressive behavior rises (p. 15). This idea coincides with SLT, which explains how modeling is a powerful way of learning attitudes, thought processes and behavior (p. 19). "Characters such as SpongeBob and Dora that are attractive and childlike in nature should be potent role models for young age groups

(p. 2),” and “the impact of media violence on aggression is stronger among children who report that they act like and identify with violent characters (p. 6).” Naturally, assumptions could be made that less exposure equals less attachment to a character. However, with today’s media rich environment each of the 65 preschoolers in their sample could identify a character they really liked. “Preschoolers reported a high degree of emulation of their chosen character and even stronger desire to be friends with the character (p. 18).”

Ryan (2010) provides an example of how an emotional bond is created with *Dora the Explorer*; a cartoon in which the main character is “direct” and “inquisitive” (p. 60). Dora and her sidekick often ask kids’ for their input. “Dora’s directness communicates respect for her audience, and creates an emotional bond between the character and child audience. (p. 60). Ostrov, Gentile & Mullins (2013) add that, “Media violence does not have its effects solely through modeling, but also by increased aggressive feelings, arousal, and thoughts (p.39).”

The most recent study regarding aggression in early childhood media was presented by Ostrov et al. (2013) who focused on various types of aggression in primarily educational media programs. The current 2013 study revealed that educational media exposure (EME) can actually increase aggression. “Although most research on educational media exposure (EME) has documented a significant effect on positive academic and social outcomes, these results suggest that EME may simultaneously have a detrimental effect on children’s social behavior (p. 42).” Results concluded that preschoolers may not understand how to follow a storyline from a conflict early in the episode to the resolution skills usually shown toward the end and put it all together. Therefore, attention might get centered on the modeled behaviors shown during conflict scenarios rather than during making amends, and learn an unintended lesson (p. 39). Ostrov et al. (2013) also refer to previous research that older children can recognize cues relevant to the plot,

but preschoolers pay greater attention to things like action and music (p. 42). Given this information, it may be assumed that preschoolers take away parts of media content that are out of context.

Returning to the component of SLT concerning a person's ability to filter what behaviors they should copy (Bandura, 1977; Hamlett, 2008), Ostrov et al. (2013) claim that preschoolers are less able to filter out aggressive models because they are "not likely to have incorporated social norms against aggressive behavior (p. 38)." Therefore, this age group is most likely not aware of what components are appropriate to copy or not, unless specifically addressed by a parent or caregiver (Hamlett, 2008; Wilson & Drogos, 2007; Whitaker, 2008).

### **Parental Roles**

Another significant factor in preschooler's interaction with media is in the relation of parents and other caretakers with the child's media exposure. Seiter (1998) investigated personal beliefs and approaches to media effects of four different preschool or daycare providers. The study aimed to describe how the theories of each teacher correlated with the implementation or lack of media censorship in the classroom. The care environments ranged from a wealthy suburban school to a poor, in-home care facility. Two teachers had high censorship strategies due to the belief of strong media effects and two adopted little to no censorship approaches due to weak media effects beliefs.

One teacher recognized preschoolers as active television consumers and accepted it as a normal influence on child play. She wasn't concerned about violent content in children's programs and was "confident that the children can distinguish between media fiction and reality" (p.24). She was affectionate and often spoke to the children about the content they watched, and had very clear boundaries between what's acceptable for adults versus children. Another teacher

implemented somewhat abnormal media censorship ideas in her class and held an authoritative role with children and parents. She openly gave media censorship advice to parents. Although not well informed about children's programming or movies, she believes television has a terribly negative impact on children. The boundaries between what's allowed for adults versus children were blurry here in comparison to the other teacher (p. 25).

Seiter (1998) found that narrow ideologies can actually worsen a pre-existing problem like inadequate parenting skills or other anxieties. The highly restrictive teacher seemed to have anxieties about media. The media-embracing caregiver still advised parents to prevent children from watching adult content and refrain from always using television as a babysitter. She felt parents need to play and interact with their children without substituting that with media. The study's findings suggest we scrutinize how and why media is controlled in the children's environment as that can also influence them. Preschool and daycare facilities "serve as a primary venue in practicing early socialization, especially with regard to media and both the illegitimate and legitimate forms of cultural capital (Seiter 1998, abstract, p. 1)."

Researchers also reference the need for co-viewing (Nolan, 2012, Ryan, 2010), and Ostrov et al. (2013) add active participation as a requirement for parents to assist preschoolers with correct interpretation and learning the moral of the story. "We echo the calls of others that suggest that parents not just co-view, but actively mediate the content in the media (p. 43)." This might help association between aggressive behaviors in peer conflict scenarios to the intended lesson; such as conflict resolution. These types of storylines frequently occur in educational programming, such as *Clifford the Big Red Dog* (p. 39).

"With the increase in children's television exposure, attitudes such as talking back to parents that are learned from watching compared to real life may steadily increase. Children

model parent's involvement with the television, and mimic their behaviors, including types of programs viewed and hours spent. Lack of parental involvement in television viewing may continue to increase these effects (Nolan, 2012)."

Peters & Blumberg (2002) agree with the role of adults in helping with preschoolers' interpretations of aggressive and violent content in cartoons. Specifically, the efforts should involve "monitoring how violence is used to resolve interpersonal conflicts and the message communicated to the viewer about the appropriateness of this violence (p. 146)." Parents can explain that a villains' defeat after violent behavior does have consequences, even for the superheroes. Adults should address motives, actions and "morally acceptable alternatives" (p. 147) in both the cartoon and real life situations. Parents and educators play a significant role in the volume of influence violent or aggressive cartoon content has on their preschoolers (p. 147).

### **Study Objectives**

Preschoolers are developmentally susceptible to media influences -- much of their media exposure contains significant amounts of violence and SLT provides the theoretical explanation as to how such violence can negatively influence preschooler behavior. While a few studies have experimentally explored the effects of violent media on preschooler behavior, what hasn't been examined is how these learned behaviors are reflected in preschoolers' everyday lives. Is it during conflicts? Is it occasional or regular? Livingstone (1996) says "results which are relatively consistent in the experimental literature have generally been poorly replicated under naturalistic conditions, although relatively few studies have attempted this" (p. 310). In the case of preschoolers' behaviors, experimental findings can't be generalized unless matched with replication in everyday situations (p. 310).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of cartoon viewing on



preschool-aged children by capturing the observations of their parents, caregivers and teachers through in-depth interviews to determine how the violence modeled in cartoons influence children's behaviors. To be clear, this study does not attempt to replicate experimental conditions in real life, but gain insightful depictions from natural settings of those who know the preschoolers best. The research questions posed for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What amount and content of television are preschoolers consuming?

RQ2: How do parents and caregivers perceive and interact with the preschooler's media use?

RQ3: Do parents see preschoolers modeling behaviors from media content?

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative method of communication research to investigate what kind of impact, if any, violence or aggression in cartoons has on preschoolers and in what context. A qualitative approach was chosen to see inside the lives of preschoolers and capture various interpretations, stories and events regarding the issue of media content and aggressive behavior. In short, this study aims to better understand whether these cartoons have a substantial effect, and if they shape preschoolers' developing behavioral patterns in a natural setting. Qualitative research methods are effective in putting ideas or situations into the words and experiences of people involved in the social issue (Lindlof, 1995).

Wimmer & Dominick (2013) discuss the fact that quantitative techniques often limit a researcher's ability to adjust a study while it's in progress and can also limit participants' responses (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). However, using flexible interview questioning techniques, qualitative interviews can be customized to gain more personal information from participants. Qualitative research methods fall in the interpretive category of social sciences. "The aim of the interpretive paradigm is to understand how people in everyday natural settings create meaning and interpret the events in their world"(Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p. 117).

#### **Sampling**

This study starts with a purposive sample. Since preschoolers are unable to describe their behavior in detail, the next best thing is using their parents and caregivers as research participants. Parents, preschool teachers and daycare providers constantly observe behavior of these children and should be able to provide insight regarding the behaviors and personalities of these children. Initial invitations were sent to 18 total parents, teachers and daycare providers of 3 and 4 year-olds asking them if they were interested in participating in this research. Parents

whose preschoolers attend Lakeview Elementary Preschool in Solon, Iowa were asked to participate, along with teachers at the same school and in-home daycare providers in the same area. Invitations were sent home with the preschool students in their backpacks and respondents volunteered to participate.

Solon, Iowa is a small community of around 3,000 within its city limits, with many people residing outside of city limits. This town is well known for its successful high school sports teams, and seems to have an emphasis on ideal family values and status. This area is unique, because it has small town values, but is centrally-located right between two much bigger cities; each only a 15-minute venture away. Therefore, many families interviewed have very busy lifestyles; they sacrifice certain lifestyles in order to work in a big city but live in a small one. This population is therefore not representative of the general public, but provides a window into a middle SES community at a boundary between large and small community sizes.

Schedules did not allow everyone invited to participate, so referrals were also used, which therefore led to snowball sampling. Ten total interviews were conducted, at which the findings reached a saturation point. According to Wimmer & Dominick (2013), saturation point is reached when interview responses start to overlap (p. 139). As long as fresh information was found, interviews were added. However, a cap would be placed at 15 interviews if necessary, due to research time limitations.

### **Interview Procedures and Data Collection**

Most of the in-depth initial interviews with participants took place in person in Solon, Iowa. A few interviews took place via telephone and one was via Skype due to geographic location. All interviews were conducted during a two month period between August 2013 and September 2013. Participants were interviewed in person whenever possible, usually in their

home or a setting of their choice. Interviews averaged one hour each, using semi-structured questions to guide the conversations but allowing for flexibility. Open-ended questions allowed participants freedom to add or emphasize anything they felt was important to the topic. The interviews were casual to ease participants and get them thinking and talking. They were advised that they were not obligated to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. Participants were asked to explain their logic behind observations of the preschoolers' behavior. Any bias I may have had was actively prevented from surfacing in interviews by not describing my own concerns or experience with the topic at hand. I also did not give specific examples I've noticed in cartoon content or associated behavior. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Participants were asked to provide personal demographic background information to understand the child's socioeconomic status (SES) (APA, 2013). Questions were asked about the child's personality, likes and dislikes, and each caregiver's personal approach to media. Questions were asked about the amount of exposure, what types of programs, channels or movies the child watches, and how often the television is left on in their homes in general. Participants described the child's behavior when dealing with conflict or frustration and how the child behaves during pretend play or pretend scenarios. Participants also described their concept of aggressive behavior and what type of child they would 'label' as aggressive. See Appendix A for the interview question outline.

### **Analysis and Validity**

Each interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed into a word processing document for referral and analysis. Each transcribed interview was considered a set of data and analysis began after compiling each participant's data set. Responses were analyzed for patterns or themes, such as similar types of observed behavior and similar content in cartoons. Answers

were first categorized by answers into three groups: caregivers and parents who are concerned about the effects of media on preschoolers, those who are indifferent about the effects of media on preschoolers, and those who seem completely unaware of possible effects of media on preschoolers. Findings were also categorized by types of aggression or lack thereof.

Any interpretations made on behalf of the participants reflect their responses. Emerging themes and patterns were discussed with an expert in qualitative methodology. Any disputes or unclear areas when analyzing findings were handled by contacting participants again to obtain further clarification. Since variables in qualitative research are different than in quantitative research, the data collection and organization of ideas are used to strengthen the validity of the findings.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the results of the in-depth interviews and presents a synthesis of the relevant themes addressing the proposed research questions of (RQ1) what television content and amount are preschoolers consuming; (RQ2) how do parents and caregivers perceive and interact with the preschooler's media use; and (RQ3) do parents see preschoolers modeling behaviors from media content? Ten female mothers, ranging from 26- to 53-year-olds participated. To best construct the position of each participant, an introduction is first made for each, detailing demographic information and other characteristics pertinent to this study. In the process of interviewing, many categories emerged in the children's behavior and modeling, media use in general, and the background information on each of the families. These categories are grouped into three major themes based on the above research questions and will be discussed following the participant introductions.

### **Participant Summaries**

#### *Participant #1*

The first participant was a 26-year-old mother and homemaker in Brighton, Colorado. She was married to a military man who is out of country many months of the year. She had 3 children at home: a 4-year-old girl, 3-year-old boy, and a 5-month-old girl. This mother provided insight for both of her older children. This home subscribed to cable channels and had the television on often; with cartoons in the mornings for a couple hours, and music station on in the background the rest of the day. The children watched a lot of Disney Junior and Nick Junior. They also watched Disney and Pixar movies. This participant specifically stated that she intentionally used only age-appropriate cartoons and did not allow her kids to watch *SpongeBob*,

*Fishhooks*, or any *Superman*, *Batman*, or other superhero types of cartoons.

*Participant #2*

Participant two was a 36-year-old mother who resided in Loveland, Colorado and just recently got divorced. She had a 4-year-old female preschooler and worked in accounting. This home did not subscribe to any cable channels, so they watched mostly Disney movies and PBS channel cartoons. This child watched about 30 minutes per day; a total of 5-6 hours of programs weekly. The participant reported that screen time is not intentionally limited; they just often have a busy schedule or other things they are more interested in doing.

*Participant #3*

Participant three was a mother of two school-aged children, age 34, and also an in-home daycare provider for young children (including 3- and 4-year-olds). She provided observations for mostly a 3-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy, but a few other children also came to mind. She was married and resided in Solon, Iowa. This in-home daycare is very structured and provides fresh, unprocessed food for the children, which is important to her. The television is rarely on in her household during daycare hours; with children watching only 30-minute PBS television programs a couple times a week before naptime. She intentionally limited screen time, but allowed some computer gaming time for short segments of time. "I am very judicious about my screen time, especially with the younger ones. We only use it before naptime just a couple of times a week."

*Participant #4*

This participant was a 34 year-old married mother who resided near Solon, Iowa. She had two girls, ages 3 and 5. She was an in-home daycare provider, but was questioned solely on her 3-year-old preschool daughter. She often had the television on at home, but mostly played music

channels. Her daughter, who turned 4 only a couple of weeks after our interview, watched movies and played games on the iPad, but rarely watched regular television programming. PBS kids' shows like *Super Why* were mentioned, along with *Coraline* and *Brave* for animated movies. This household did not subscribe to any television service, but used a device they can stream programs and movies on, called Hulu. They used YouTube to find *Hello Kitty* things; a character this preschooler enjoyed. There weren't specific limiting rules in this household.

#### *Participant #5*

This participant was a 38-year-old married mother who also resided near Solon, Iowa. She had two children: a boy who attended preschool, age 4 and a daughter, age 6. She was a conservation officer. This household did not subscribe to any television service, and the children were limited to watching a movie they checked out from the library once a week, sometimes twice a week. This mother has always intentionally limited television. "I definitely limit it; I'm not a TV person. They get to watch a movie on Friday nights, and sometimes on Saturday. They have a Leap Pad that we use on long car trips." This family spent a lot of time outdoors.

#### *Participant #6*

This participant was a 35-year-old married mother who resided in Loveland, Colorado. She had a boy, age 4, who attended preschool and a daughter, age 6. She worked two jobs; she waited tables in a restaurant and cleaned large homes. This household subscribed to cable television, and the children watched mostly the Disney Channel and Sprout. When she was home, she didn't have the TV on unless they were going to watch a program; however, when her husband was home in the evenings, approximately 5 p.m. until 11 p.m., the television was on. When asked about screen time beliefs, she said "I try to limit it, because I feel like when you are a kid, you don't need to sit in front of a TV or computer. They don't have an iPad or LeapPad,



but sometimes he will play games on the computer if I'm on the phone. I think it's hard to limit, but I try to."

*Participant #7*

Participant seven was a 37-year-old mother of three who resided near Solon, Iowa. She was also married, and managed a dental practice. Her children were ages 4, 10 and 11. For the interview, we focused on her 4-year-old male preschooler. This household subscribed to cable television, but rarely watched it. They had the television on in the background with music stations sometimes. Her 4-year-old watched cartoons sometimes in the mornings to wake up while his parents got ready for work. He watched mostly Disney and Nick Jr. channels.

*Participant #8*

This participant was 35 years old, and worked from home as an economist. She was a married mother of two and resided near Solon, Iowa. Her two boys were 14 months and 3 years-old, but he had not yet attended preschool. This household subscribed to cable television, and her son watched Disney, Nick Jr. and PBS channel programming. He watched an hour or two daily, and she only had the television on when watching it, whereas her husband had the television on quite often when he was home.

*Participant #9*

This participant was a 53-year-old preschool teacher who resided in Webster City, Iowa. She was also married and had two school-aged children of her own, but was interviewed about her interactions with preschool-aged children because she teaches 3 and 4-year-old preschool. This teacher had fifteen 3-year-old preschoolers in her class. Since the class only met two half-days per week, they did not have any television or movies at all. However, they did have two

computers and the children were limited to short times on them for playing games and learning to navigate it.

*Participant #10*

This participant was a 32-year-old mother of three boys, ages 7 months, 3 years and 7 years old. She was a homemaker who used to be a phlebotomist and resided in the country near Ellsworth, Iowa. Her 3 year-old had just began preschool the past fall. This household did not have cable television, and rarely had the television on at all. They limited screen time to 30 minutes per day on the weekdays, and a couple hours on the weekends to allow for more family time and creativity. When the almost 4-year-old did get screen time, he watched *Wild Kratts* on PBS with his brother and played a little bit of video games on the weekends. Sometimes they watched movies on the weekends as well. His parents accompanied him and engaged along with him in any screen time he engaged in.

*Demographic Summary*

All ten participants were mothers. Even the daycare provider and teacher had children of their own. All participants had some level of education after high school: half of the participants had bachelor's degrees, and the other half had 1-3 years of college education. Half the participants were in the same annual income bracket of \$41-80K and the rest were above that. All participants were Caucasian and married; with the exception of one, who just ended her marriage not long before the interviews. Seven of the participants lived in or near the small town of Solon, Iowa and three resided in the front range of Colorado. Half of the subject children lived in a rural area; and half lived in suburban areas. Also noted was that all interviews took place at summer's end and school year beginning. Season and school year could have potentially impacted level of media exposure for preschoolers.

## **Theme 1: Media Consumption**

### *Media Type*

Different types of media besides television are surrounding preschoolers today. Gaming devices and computers are also more accessible for this age group than for previous generations (Rideout et al, 2006). Parallel with this statement, the participants mentioned more than just television when asked about types of media used by the preschoolers.

Secondary to television, computers and iPads were mentioned most frequently, followed by LeapPad or LeapFrog devices. Participant 1 reported, “We have a lot of educational games on the iPad and I let them use it, and I do use that as a babysitter sometimes, but we also set a timer and they have to share or do something else every 20 or 30 minutes. They cannot play any adult games.” Participant 2 let her 4-year-old daycare child use her computer: “With some older preschoolers, I do think it’s important to teach them how to navigate the computer, because I know they teach that in school.” Participant 4 mentioned other media types; “(My daughter) likes YouTube and *Hello Kitty* games on the iPad but I do limit it. We do use a portable DVD player in the car...” Participant 5, who had strict television exposure limits stated, “They have a LeapPad that we use in the car on long trips. They play games on there but he has a couple of *Calliou* videos on there. Not on short trips though.” Although some participants mentioned other media involvement, this study will focus on television exposure. As noted above, participants reported that preschoolers had also watched cartoon episodes or movies on other devices, however they did not count this exposure when reporting daily and weekly exposure time.

### *Television Exposure*

All participants’ children watched cartoons. The reported range of exposure was 30 minutes to 4 hours per day. Participants were asked to only include hours actually watching

programs, when attention was paid in the exposure time reported. They did not include background television. Only one household had a heavier exposure level (3-4 hours per day). Four environments reported 1-2 hours per day on average, and the remaining five environments reported 30 minutes or less per day of viewing time.

A couple respondents mentioned their child's attention span was too short to sit and pay attention to one cartoon for a very long period of time. Participant 8 mentioned, "We watch a couple of shows a day but he's not really into it. He usually gets bored within like fifteen minutes." Participant 4 mentioned that (neither one of her daughters) "sit still for too long of a period of time anyway, so we don't watch too much."

### *Media Content*

Of the ten households participating, half had cable television and the other half used regular free streaming channels (antenna), Netflix, Hulu or simply checked out videos at the library. Therefore, half of the participants reported limited exposure to certain cartoons and channels unless they specifically rented or checked out those cartoons. Free streaming channels only included PBS stations of the specific stations reported below.

The main stations reported for viewing were PBS Kids, Disney, Disney Junior and Nick Junior stations. Specific programs mentioned were *Super Why*, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Sophia the First*, *Mike the Knight*, *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*, *Wild Kratts*, *Handy Manny*, *Diego*, *Doc McStuffins*, *Calliou* and *Unizoomi*. These programs were all geared toward young children. Some were easier for the youngest to understand (Mickey Mouse Clubhouse) and some were for preschoolers and older since they include letters, spelling and numbers (Super Why). Almost all of them included some type of 'moral lesson' in each episode. Two specific programs were mentioned that were not allowed in one house: *Sponge Bob*

*Squarepants* and *Fishhooks*, along with a certain genre not allowed in that same home – ‘superhero’ types of cartoons, such as *Batman*, *Avengers* and *Spiderman*. Participant 1 stated, “Spongebob (Squarepants) is NOT allowed at our house. My kids are so smart and pick up on stuff too easy! They even know, as soon as it comes on they yell ‘Mom...this is not allowed in our house!’ and we change the channel. It’s just too wild and crazy and teaches them bad things.” Although Participant 1 did not specify exactly what ‘stuff’ she feels her children might have learned from these types of cartoons, when she discussed her friend’s children, who did watch those shows, she implied that the high-energy, superhero violence could lead to hyper activity and aggression in child play behavior. “We don’t watch Avengers or Spiderman...but her boys do and that’s why they act out!”

**(RQ1) What amount and content of television are preschoolers consuming?**

In this sample, preschoolers watched a variety of programs on PBS kids, Disney and Nickelodeon: all generally considered appropriate for young children. They also played games on electronic devices, watched programs through the Internet, and even went to the theaters to see movies.

Participants reported average daily exposures between 30 minutes and 4 hours per day, which did not include other screen time in those figures, such as gaming devices, iPads, computers or other electronic toys. Participants who reported more exposure were also watching more programs on cable TV stations than just the PBS kids stations, which, in a previous content analysis PBS stations were found to have more informal programs than educational programs (Hamlett, 2008).

According to the participants, educational programs dominated the preschoolers’ media use over the informal programs featured on Saturday mornings. However, content present when

the television was left on in the background was not included. When asked to identify specific programs the children regularly watched, many participants referred to the stations, rather than program names, first. When asked for more detail, they were able to give a few examples such as *Daniel Tiger* (PBS), *Calliou* (PBS), *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (Disney), and *UniZoomi* (Disney Jr). It was difficult to decipher if any one specific program or programs dominated preschooler interest, but *Daniel Tiger* (PBS) was mentioned the most when learned behaviors were discussed.

## **Theme 2: Parent Concern and Involvement**

### *Concern Level and Co-Viewing*

Half of the sample seemed unconcerned about the effects of cartoons on the children. Although not specifically questioned regarding this particular topic, their physical demeanor during the interviews, facial expressions and certain ways of answering questions surrounding concern on behalf of the parent led to this conclusion. A few parents mentioned short attention spans, which implied that their child wasn't in danger of being overly influenced. Lack of exposure left some parents unconcerned as well. When asked if she noticed any change in her 4-year-old's behavior after he watched certain programs, participant 7 confirmed her lack of worry: "No, because he hardly watches any." She added, "I do feel that kids can learn different attitudes and behaviors from what they see on TV, which can be good and bad. This is one of the reasons we do not watch much in our house and if we are watching TV, it is somewhat educational." Participant 2 mentioned, "We don't have any rules about (television). We only watch about 30 minutes a day. We don't really watch much TV." She explained that her busy lifestyle and lack of program choices with no cable subscription also took part.

Of the other half of participants who seemed more concerned about TV effects, only two participants went out of their way to actively participate in co-viewing. Participant 10 said, “We watch it together. We engage them in the program and talk to them about it.” An in-home daycare provider said she would “ask them comprehension questions as we watch, to try to keep it as much as an active process as I can.” Other participants would actively participate, but only when the child invited it. Participant 1 explained, “I watch a lot of it with them since I’m home with them. Yes, we talk about the shows quite a bit actually. But if we do, it’s because they ask me, and first I’ll ask them what they thought was going on in their terminology and I’ll ask them if that was the right choice and kind of put it into real life.” The recently divorced mother admitted, “If she has questions, we talk about it. But I don’t really initiate a conversation about it.”

Participant 8 confirmed that she didn’t really watch any cartoons with her 3-year-old, but “my husband does and he talks to him about the shows, mostly if he’s asking questions, but usually he’s just pointing to the show and looking for a reaction.” Participant 4 did what she could. “I might sit down for like ten minutes or something and watch with them, but animated stuff I usually am in the kitchen or whatever and I pop in when I can and contribute.” A few didn’t watch anything at all with the kids. Participant 5 stated, “I don’t really watch anything with them.” Participant 6 says there wasn’t enough time to watch with her kids. “No, I never do. It’s so busy that we run most of the day, come home, eat dinner and the most they get at night is an hour before bed.” Participant 7 also credited the busy lifestyle. “Not really. Usually it’s more for keeping him busy while we get ready for work or something.”

*Limiting Exposure Time or Content*

Only three participants stated specific time limitation rules in their households. One stay at home mom reported, “We limit it for family time; we want them to use their minds to be creative rather than TV.”

One mother used mainly PBS educational programs, except on rare occasions. Nearly all of the participants listed educational cartoons or those geared toward their age group. However, one mother admitted that in addition to the age-appropriate content, she allowed her 4-year-old girl to watch PG-13 movies. “I let my kids watch *Harry Potter* or *The Hobbit* and things like that. I actually let her watch *The Hunger Games*.”

**(RQ2) How do parents and caregivers perceive and interact with the preschooler’s media use?**

Of the participants in this study, about half thought there definitely could be behavior changes involved with too much exposure time, but didn’t associate it with their own preschooler, because each believed their child(ren) had somewhat limited exposure. The other half of participants weren’t really sure if too much TV exposure could be problematic; they either didn’t pay enough attention or devote enough time to the situation to really know either way. Many of the study’s participants had active lifestyles and didn’t feel their preschoolers were overly exposed or even put much weight on the child’s level of interest in the cartoons in general.

Half of participants weren’t concerned with cartoon content and the half that seemed to have some level of concern still didn’t report very active involvement in assisting the preschooler with comprehension of the programs and content. Superhero style cartoons did resonate with parents as types of cartoons that included some violence, but since none of the participants’ reported exposure to these types of programs, the level of concern was low overall. The stay at home moms and in-home daycare provider seemed to both have the most knowledge and



concern about content or exposure time, most likely due to being around it more than others, and having ample time to observe both the cartoons and the children. Many parents admitted they didn't actually pay attention to the programs themselves and/or rarely had time to actually sit down and watch the cartoons alongside the children. Almost every participant seemed unaware that PBS kids channel is the only outlet considered to have all educational programming. Overall, they were unaware that Disney and Nickelodeon actually have a large amount of what previous research had identified as informal programming. Overall, the adults did not perceive the children's media use to be anything of concern. In fact, parents seemed to think that educational programs often ended with a positive outcome and help teach kids good manners and social skills.

Only 3 of the 10 participants laid out specific limitations in regards to television. These results implied that parents and caregivers may not be fully aware of physically, verbally or relationally aggressive content in cartoons. In fact, most seemed to automatically think of physical violence and were somewhat oblivious to other types that may or may not be present in the content to which their preschooler is exposed.

### **Theme 3: Modeling and Aggressive Behavior**

#### *Modeling*

When asked about general copying and modeling behaviors, every participant could identify at least some form. The most commonly identified theme was that preschoolers often modeled things they saw and heard in every day circumstances and situations. Participant 3 provided examples she witnessed in her daycare: "They love to pretend to cook, feed the babies (dolls) and change their diapers, copy me putting the babies in their beds and saying 'shhh.'"

Participant 4 noted, “They do a lot of house stuff with babies, moms and dads. They get married a lot, go shopping and play store. My sister smokes, so my daughters pretend to smoke.”

Participant 7 said that her son liked pretending to be trained like a dog since he witnessed and observed his family training their new dog. She noticed more copying in his behavior from whatever his older siblings did rather than what he saw on television.

Interestingly, many parents identified positive aspects and had positive opinions about the educational cartoons. Most cartoons geared at preschool-aged children were assumed by participants to be at least “somewhat” educational; specifically, cartoons featured on the Disney Channel, for example. Regarding observed modeling from media, several brought up positive behaviors and words learned from programs. Participant 1 said that after watching *Daniel Tiger*, a PBS Kids show often about helping and other social skills, both her 3 and 4 year-olds became better helpers; “...although it doesn’t last very long,” she claimed. Participant 7 said her son had learned to sing a teamwork song when picking up toys from a program she couldn’t identify, and also had learned to say “take a deep breath and count to four” when he was upset from *Daniel Tiger* (PBS Kids). Participant 8 said her son had “pretended to go to the beach and have a sleepover after watching *Daniel Tiger* do the same things.”

Participants noticed and commented on the excitement the preschoolers displayed when they had learned something in real life, such as certain letters or numbers and then had it re-enforced by the cartoon. For example, Participant 3 said that, “When the TV asks her to do something or pick a letter...when she gets the answer right she gets super excited about her accomplishment.” Participant 1 identified positive associations with cartoons and positive behavior as well. “I bought her a preschool book and she already associates it with what she remembered from TV;” and “We watch a new show called Paw Patrol and they

(her 3 and 4 year old children) mimic them helping people and doing different things that they learned.”

The preschoolers reportedly showed desire to be like the characters in the programs. One preschooler’s mother described her as “theatrical” and stated, “She will watch a movie and then re-enact it over and over again. Like right now she finished watching *Brave* so she wants a bow and arrow and to be just like her.”, while another 4 year-old female enjoyed acting like princesses (Disney) and brushed her teeth like *Daniel Tiger* (PBS Kids). A preschool teacher observed one of her male students imitating *Thomas the Train* (PBS Kids). Two males from different households were reportedly observed racing their cars and talking about *Cars* (Disney) or *HotWheels* movies. A few participants noted other types of behaviors observed from media. Participant 6 noticed her son whined a lot after watching *Calliou* (PBS Kids). Participant 3 noted, “I do notice the boys acting like superheroes and some modeling there, but just pretending to fly and things like that.”

### *Conflict Scenarios*

Each participant responded similarly regarding how each child in question behaved when dealing with disappointment, anger, or frustration. Crying was identified in all responses as one common reaction, yelling or screaming was the second most common answer, and when pushed further, the preschoolers would eventually hit. Participant 1 mentioned, “My daughter gets a little bit quiet and internalizes a little bit. My son is kind of the devil sometimes. He hits and screams, throws a fit and cries over everything all the time!” Participant 8 added, “Tantrums. He throws big fits. We are trying to teach him how to say how he feels.” One mother described it in steps, saying her preschooler would first attempt to resolve the situation himself with words like ‘stop,’

but when that didn't work he either cried, hit or got an adult, the same theme throughout most of the preschoolers.

When asked if they ever disapprove of how the preschooler treated others, participants offered several 'yes' answers for boys, but no disapproval for the girls. Of the boys, hitting and being rough were the main actions to cause disapproval. One caregiver pointed out a non-physical aggressive response. Participant 3 stated, "Yes, he tries to make others feel shame. I think its normal 4-year-old boy behavior though."

Participant 9, a preschool teacher, put some of this in perspective. She stated, "You know when they are in the young 3's, they really don't know how to get their frustration out so it's more typically the ones that aren't aggressive will cry. The ones that are more confident might push or hit. I'm thinking like when they get older, I'm thinking of one that would use his fist and hit...um...when he would get frustrated. But I think for kids that are in a daycare situation, I think that's more common. The ones that do not go to daycare are more of the criers...they would come and get a teacher. I think it's because when they are 3 and not in daycare, they don't know how to handle the situation, so they just cry and get a teacher. Sharing is another topic...of course they all get frustrated then." Participants implied the boys' behaviors to be acceptable when they described it to be normal or average behavior. Participant 6 said, "It's just the normal picking on each other and fighting over toys here I guess."

When asked specifically if she thought television influenced her child's behavior at all, participant 4 said, "I'm sure it does, because everybody does in some form." Since she couldn't identify specifics, facts about aggression in cartoons from previous research were reviewed with the participant, and she added, "I guess I don't see it. Maybe it's because mine are girls and we don't have cable TV." When dealing with conflict, this participant identified "screaming and

crying” as a result for her preschooler. She also added that she doesn’t “push or hit, but definitely yells.”

Participant 1 referred to her son as behaving like “the devil sometimes” and said he “hits, yells, screams and throws a fit,” but could not associate those actions with media. However, she added, “I think a lot of the play that my children do are based off cartoons...although it generally doesn’t last long.”

Similarly, participant 3 identified aggressive behaviors in both a 3 year-old girl and a 4 year-old boy. According to her, the girl often had “meltdowns” and became “inordinarily upset” or “angry.” The boy “tries to exert himself onto others,” “show he’s the boss” and held a “‘I know what I’m doing’ kind of attitude.” He also “tries to make others feel shame.” Yet these behaviors, identified as aggressive by previous research, could not be specifically linked to cartoon exposure by this participant.

### **(RQ3) Do parents see preschoolers modeling behaviors from media content?**

All participants witnessed some form of modeling and copying from media and identified mostly positive or neutral behaviors. Although aggressive behaviors were identified in 7 of the 10 descriptions of interactions or conflicts, participants had trouble identifying the learned source of the negative behaviors. In their minds, it was not certain whether or not the behavior was modeled from something they viewed in a cartoon. While parents and caretakers brought up observations that cartoons did influence the children in some way, the findings of this study were not able to identify clear correlations between cartoons and aggressive behavior in preschool aged children. Preschoolers in this sample had educated parents who resided in rural or small town areas and the families seemed to be either more active outdoors or within their communities. They had less focus on television and cartoons in general. Therefore, these

children played outside, with their family, or with their pets and toys more than they watched cartoons. All preschoolers involved seem to have increased imaginations after watching cartoons; they either pretended to be the characters or do different role playing, but there was no evidence that the cartoons had affected their behaviors in a negative manner. In fact, there were a handful of positive behaviors mentioned, learned from PBS educational cartoons. Preschoolers appeared to pay attention just long enough to grasp a few key points of a storyline in a cartoon, but learned more from watching parents, peers, siblings or other adults in real life. With so many influences out there, even after finding and identifying sources, it can be challenging to discover what impacts are greater.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS**

In today's society, people are immersed in media. Younger and younger people are becoming the market for advertising, toys, movies, and more. Children are growing up with various potential influences that older generations did not. Therefore, it is imperative to know what impact these influences have on today's youth. This study focused on the possible impact cartoons have on preschool-aged children. Aggression and violence had both been identified in cartoon content, but preschoolers have remained an understudied audience. Likewise, existing studies have been experimental and none had yet explored preschooler behavior in a more naturalistic setting.

Using social learning theory as a guide, specifically the concept of modeling viewed behavior, the study conducted in-depth interviews of parents and caregivers to fill this gap and explore the interactions between media content and preschooler behaviors.

Almost every participant said that their preschooler was influenced in some way by cartoons; either copying scenes, repeating words or just playing with the toys featured on TV. The findings of this study suggested that although caregivers were seeing cartoon influence on the children, it was difficult to label certain cartoons as the learning source for negative, aggressive behaviors in regular day-to-day lives. Although several preschoolers used various aggressive acts in conflict scenarios, such as yelling, hitting and even verbally manipulative tactics, these specific behaviors were not specifically linked to cartoon content that the children were exposed to. Parents and caregivers seemed to exhibit a similar attitude regarding negative behaviors; that it was normal, developmental behavior, and none tied it directly to watching any similar types of behavior in cartoons.

Since participants could identify positive behaviors learned from watching educational television, they seem unconcerned with cartoon content and exposure time. Of this sample, families had very busy lifestyles and no time to worry about breaking down cartoon program content. Disney, PBS and Nickelodeon are popular, well-known channels for children, so they seemed to be trusted. However, many parents seemed to have an underlying perception that too much time spent with electronics, technology or television wasn't a good thing. The results of this study showed evidence that cartoons were indeed influencing preschoolers in some way. What is not known is how preschoolers interpret the programs. Adults need breaks from the demands of parenting, and using television or media, in moderation, seemed to be considered culturally acceptable among this sample. Homemakers and daycare providers seemed to have a better understanding of the possibilities that come with exposure levels and content.

### **Social Stigma**

The reported average exposure times were less than the 2011 national average of 4.1 hours per day (Tandon, Zhou, Lozano & Christakis, 2011). This may be because participants all had busy lifestyles and, given their status, have likely been exposed to regular pediatric recommendations to limit their children's exposure to television and have accepted such recommendations in their homes. However, because the majority did not set specific limits on exposure, it may also be possible that participants underreported their children's exposure, either consciously or unconsciously, due to social stigma. Self reported behaviors are well known to err on the side of social acceptability, and such pediatric recommendations may actually help construct such a stigma that parents are addressing through selective reporting to the interview questions or even selective attention to their children's media consumption. Therefore, the



exposure captured in this study may reflect an underestimation of exposure times.

Supporting this interpretation is an emergence of a third-person effect in the results. Third person effects are when people generally acknowledge a negative effect from media messages on others, but do not consider themselves susceptible to the effect, often due to a self-serving bias. Third person effects are prevalent within topics surrounded by social stigma. A few participants mentioned they were aware of behavioral problems stemming from over-exposure. Participant 1 explained that her friend's children 'act out' often as a result of watching a lot of superhero cartoons or violent cartoons of that fashion. She claimed after her kids spend the whole day with her friend's children, 'it shows.' "My friend's two boys are very aggressive and they are antagonizers. My son becomes a lot more aggressive when he's around them." Two mothers said they know too much television is not a good thing, so they 'try' to limit it for their children. Participant 6 said, "I think it's hard to limit, but I try to." However, both brought up their husbands' television habits. When asked how often the television is left on, participant 6 said "I never have it on, but my husband has it on all the time when he's home from like 5 pm until whenever he goes to bed." Participant 8 said nearly the same thing "I rarely have it (the television) on but my husband has it on all the time when he's home." Participant 8 added, "I try not to let them watch too much," and "I try to treat it like a reward." Such blaming of others while celebrating the self indicates an awareness of the problem, but a lack of acceptance that the same problem may be affecting the individual or those under the individual's care. As such, the results of this study must be interpreted through the filter of participants who likely underreported exposure and potentially behaviors, to either consciously or unconsciously, place themselves on the acceptable side of a known social stigma.

## Theoretical Implications

Social Learning Theory states that four main components need to happen for behavior modeling to take place: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Attention is the first requirement for individuals to replicate a modeled behavior, and parents had reported short attention spans at the preschool age, perhaps limiting replication of aggression or violence seen in cartoons. In experimental settings, children were most likely more focused than in real life settings with all kinds of daily distractions involved, and therefore might exude a different result. Retaining information may also be difficult for preschoolers if they do not focus on the modeled behavior long enough. Preschoolers can probably physically reproduce behaviors, but some kind of motivation must be present. By the ages of 3 and 4, children have developed a lot more understanding about what gains positive or negative outcomes in their environments. They have already learned what gets them in trouble or what gains them rewards. Perhaps many children in this study were practicing helping after watching *Daniel Tiger* be helpful because they already had life experience rewarding them or someone else for such behavior.

Motivation also leads to another part of the theory, which states that the child's personal filtering influences what behaviors to copy. Since the preschoolers in this study are all being raised in households of higher SES (socio-economic status), these children may have more advanced or shaped social norms due to certain parenting styles. All households visited appeared orderly, structured and clean. All caregivers and parents seemed to value good manners, attire and behavior. This suggested that morals and manners were likely taught to the preschoolers, and these particular subjects were most likely held responsible for their actions in their environments. The subject preschoolers most likely took away more positives from cartoons than children who are raised with blurred moral values and a lower self-esteem. This sample's parental involvement

in the children's lives seemed high. If a preschooler was exposed to cartoons regularly without a structured household with morals and values instilled, the preschooler might have much different motivations and filtering, therefore meeting the requirements deemed necessary for social learning and modeling. Participants in this study, although they hold very busy lifestyles and may not be able to dissect every aspect of exposure for their child, seem to hold enough value in parenting and life experiences where moderate media influences don't seem to cause detrimental effects to the preschoolers' behavior.

### **Practical Implications**

Beyond theoretical implications, the results of this study also offer practical recommendations for both parents as well as society at large. Active co-viewing may not only help educate parents and caregivers about the content the preschoolers watch, but also help the children get what they should from the program, as scholars suggest (Nolan, 2012 & Ostrov et al., 2013). Teachers and daycare providers need to be well informed on the topic. These leaders in society should help educate parents on media exposure and explain why time limits are important but also how educational content can be taken out of context and how problems might arise.

Given the busy lifestyles of many families today, it also might be beneficial if policymakers support more research on cartoons geared toward preschoolers, and recommend displaying details about the program on the TV guide or at the start of the program. As previous research indicated, the current ratings system is not clear nor successful (Basore, 2008 & Hamlett, 2008).

From a content creation standpoint, television stations could clearly define particular age groups for programs or even designate specific hours for specific age groups. Networks could

create a website or resource for parents to learn more about cartoon content and what their children are watching. While it is unlikely stations or producers would want to publicize the “dangers” of their product, there is likely a market for parents of preschool aged children who share concerns and would like a trusted source of programming to rely on to do some of the research and assessment for them. An increase in any of the previous recommendations would also raise awareness, likely increasing the market for such a system.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited to a small area in a middle-class society in Iowa. Almost all of the participants were of higher social economic status (SES). Participants from different levels of SES may perceive different levels of social stigma or may use television in different ways than the parents interviewed in this study. In addition, participants were all women in this study. It would be interesting to gain perspective from the man’s point of view on this topic as well. The study was limited to participants’ personal knowledge about aggression and what is considered aggressive. Educating participants prior to the interview might have changed the results. Specific conflicts in cartoon content could have been brought to the parents’ attention during the interviews as well, such as certain scenes or language, to help them remember or identify more specific behaviors or the child’s language used. Relationally aggressive acts such as saying, “I won’t be your friend anymore,” might have been used to educate the participants prior to the interviews to boost their memory of related instances. Future interviews could ask caregivers to think of specific times when exposure was high and behaviors seemed impacted and elaborate on the details of those situations rather than average occurrences.

This study could serve as a starting point for research on the same topic. More recent content analysis of cartoons needs to take place both from a scholarly definition of aggression,

but also from the perspective of parents as well. Likewise, future studies should explore why the some of the literature contradict these parent and caregiver's perceptions regarding aggression and cartoons. Interviewing the preschoolers themselves to understand how they interpret the media content may also be insightful.

In sum, children continue to consume larger amounts and more diverse types of media as the media environment continues to expand, regardless of expert recommendations. Therefore, it is important to understand how such media consumption of programs marketed as child-friendly may be impacting aggressive behaviors in preschoolers and beyond.

Returning to my personal reasons for instigating this study, the results have re-enforced my concerns regarding media exposure and young children, both as a parent and as a member of society. From both the interviewer perspective and my own life, I feel that parents are overwhelmed with responsibility and media is often used to fill the gaps or babysit. However, not until I completed my background research did I realize the impact active co-viewing can have with a child. When watching an educational program with my child, I saw the main character knock a cake off the table and lie about it to his mother, without consequence. Later in the storyline, the character learned about the negative consequences that came from his lie, but before that, dinner was served and the television was shut off, so my son did not get to see the storyline play out. Had I not been actively watching that with my child, what would he have taken away from that program? If he regularly watched these shows, without adult involvement, what would he learn about life? Even if he saw the entire episode, would he take parts out of context without my assistance? I hope this study and future studies will lead to a more informed society, more actively involved parenting and detailed program information widely available going forward.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview questions used to guide the conversations

#### Part I: Home life and media use

1. What is your age and gender? (caregiver/parent)
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
3. In what range is your household income?  
 A) \$0 - \$40K/yr      B) \$41K - \$80K/yr      C) \$81 – 100K/yr      D) \$100K +
4. What is your marital status?
5. In what city and state do you reside?
6. What is your occupation?
7. How many children do you have?
8. What is the child's age and gender?
9. Does this child (the 3 or 4 year old) currently attend preschool?
10. What types of activities does the child enjoy?
11. What is the child's personality like?
12. What sorts of things do you and the child do together?
13. What sorts of things does the child do on his/her own?
14. What the child does when you take care of 'adult things'? (make dinner, clean house, do teacher or daycare provider organizational things) (Sometimes people have their child watch a television show in the morning or in the evening while they take care of household chores — do you do that?)

#### PART II: Media Use

15. How do you approach media use or screen time with your children (or students)? Do you have any rules about it? What's your reasoning?
16. Does your child watch cartoons or animated videos/dvds?
17. Which channels, programs and/or movies does the child typically watch?
18. Approximately how many hours per day weekdays does your child watch? At daycare?  
On the weekends?
19. Of hours exposed, how much of it do you watch with the child? Do you talk about what's happening? How do those conversations go?
20. In your vehicle, do you use a portable TV or DVD player?
21. How often is the television on in your home? Some households like to have a television on in the background—to keep up with the news, for example—while others only have it on if someone is watching it. What is your household like?

### Part III: Behavior

22. How does your child deal with conflict?
23. How does your child deal with disappointment, frustration, or anger?
24. Does your preschooler have siblings? Do you ever disapprove of how he/she treats siblings? If so, in what way and why?
25. Do you think your child knows the difference between real life friends and characters they are attached to in the cartoon programs or movies?
26. In what ways does your child show signs of creativity? Do they play with toys on their own? Do they pretend play?
27. In pretend play, what types of scenarios and behaviors do you notice by themselves, or with others?

28. Have you observed any 'copying' types of behavior in the child? (that he/she sees in cartoons)?
29. Do you allow your child to play with toy guns, swords, or other pretend hunting toys?
30. How does the preschooler treat animals? Pets?
31. How does the child respond when someone gets hurt? (Does the child display empathy?)
32. Have you noticed any change in your child's behavior after he/she has watched a certain program on television? Do you think television influences your child's behavior? If so, how? If not, why not?
33. Please identify your personal definition and perception of aggressive or violent behavior.
34. Have you ever heard of relational aggression? Do you think aggression can take place in a non-physical manner?

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